DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 868 CS 203 826

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TITLE Multimedia English.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 9p.; The Inkwell, Ltd., Publication No. 4

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiovisual Aids; *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; *Film Production; *Integrated Curriculum; Learning Activities; *Mass Media; Multimedia Instruction; Reading Materials; Secondary Education; Slides; Tape Recordings; *Video Tape Recordings

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the rationale for including a study of the mass media in the English curriculum. It lists numerous activities through which English teachers can help students explore the media and shows how English teachers can integrate film making, videotape, sound tape, slide shows, and media-related writing into their classroom programs. The paper also discusses media and aesthetics, and it lists recommended books for related reading. (GW)

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THE INKWELL #4

MULTIMEDIA ENGLISH

Teachers have a wealth of data and statistics about the number of hours young people spend watching TV, seeing movies, and listening to records: We have confusing and sometimes contradictory information about how all this time spent with the media affects the values, attitudes, and behavior of individuals; we are in conflict about possible detrimental influences on the reading ability of students and their standards of taste and judgment. The complexity of media-related issues has led to a variety of practices in the English classroom; the precise role of mass art and mass communications in English remains difficult to determine.

The attitude of many schools and teachers has been to ignore the media altogether, hoping to offer the "superior" values of traditional literature as an alternative to the "superficiality and insignificance" of the mass media. On the other hand, we have the media freaks. For them, media are where it's at, and in their attempts to be "relevant," some teachers have turned exclusively to film, TV, and rock music, to the detriment of print-related studies.

At times the media have been used in the classroom for their own sake; at times they have been used as a means of manipulating students into conventional studies. (For instance, it has been common practice to use rock lyrics as a way of showing kids that they "really do like poetry" or to analyze rock as a way of manipulating them into a study of poetic devices.) Such practices are a disservice both to the individual media--print and nonprint--and to the students' values and interests.

Given the concern of English teachers for the effective use of language, the English classroom is an ideal place for students to sort out and develop their experiences with the world of mass media. We think that four points about media should be emphasized and used as a basis for an integrated media-in-English program:

I. Media provide people with instantaneous, abundant information about the world in which they live. Whether they (or we) like it or not, kids receive information about all manner of products and services in the world of consumerism; they learn about pollution, politics, superstars, strife, violence, kidnappings, hijackings, social affairs, religious holidays, the weather, disasters, drugs, sports. All of this information carries an aura of "truth," and the ubiquitous presence of the media causes young people to absorb it, often without choice or critical discrimination. Obviously, this informa-

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tion is an important source of vicarious experience (kids nowadays do know more about the world than previous generations); but media bombardment makes it crucial that kids learn to separate the truth from the lies, the important from the unimportant, the objective from the subjective, and the useful from the useless. Young people must learn to deal with that information in productive ways. Rather than be confused or misled, they need to be enlightened by it.

II. Media provide people with a rich mosaic of experience. The newspaper, the magazine, radio, film, and most notably television present reality in a mosaic of facts, stories, opinions, advertisements, games, images, and propaganda. For most kids the world is not one of sequentially related experiences but of seemingly unrelated experiences--juxtaposed or simultaneous: They watch television while they read the paper, engage in telephone or face-to-face conversations, play Monopoly or make love. They listen to the radio while they are talking, riding in a car, doing homework and reading. Kids are used to a fast-paced world in which they tune in to whatever information or experience seems most valuable, interesting, pressing at the time.

III. Mass media have some effect on the values, attitudes, and behavior of people. It is difficult to determine what input media have in the development of values and attitudes (and hence behavior) of their audiences--whether they shape, reinforce, or merely reflect values. The question is a particularly important one when dealing with young people who are in the process of developing values. And though we don't know for certain what specific effects are, it is axiomatic that young people need experiences that will allow them to reflect critically on the values being promoted (overtly and subtly).

IV. Media have an effect on the development of aesthetic standards and judgment of their audiences. Through their contact with the media, kids learn to like certain kinds of music, certain kinds of stories, certain kinds of people. Young people respond emotionally and intellectually to the music they listen to, the TV shows they watch, the films they see. They learn to appreciate a variety of art forms/artistic experiences. At the same time, media inundation can have a numbing effect when used uncritically, unconsciously, and in too-large doses. Young people need to become more conscious of what they like and why they like it.

EXPLORING THE MEDIA

Students need direct experiences with the media to become more aware of the effects that media have on them. And the English teacher should create an environment and experiences that allow a student to work with, talk about, think about media in new and creative ways, manipulating electronic and print media, creating his own forms and expressions as well as examining what he receives. Obviously, interesting topics in mass media and popular culture are unlimited, and students should be encouraged to explore areas of interest to them. Some possibilities:

- Examine the role of sports in American life. Compare the ways sports are presented through different media. What do various sports say about American values and interests?

- Examine popular religion in America. What kinds of perspectives are presented on the Sunday morning religious shows? To what kinds of audiences do they appeal?

- Do an in depth study of a popular hero. Or compare various heroes, e.g. sports heroes, political heroes, comic book heroes, TV heroes, heroes in history, heroes in best sellers. Do there seem to be common characteristics? Which do you find most appealing?

- Do a study of the occult as it appears in magazines, fiction, movies, and TV.

- Explore monsters. Do a historical or comparative study of Dracula, Frankenstein, Godzilla, King Kong--in novels, movies, comics, TV shows, etc.

- Analyze a popular rock group or a particular type of popular music.

- Write the history of the soap opera, or of a particular soap opera.

- Examine the roles of females on soap operas, evening drama, game shows, and various types of commercials.

- Compare the Perry Mason of Gardner's novels with the Perry Masons on TV.

- Study Saturday morning cartoons and commercials and determine the kinds of appeals that are being made to kids. Look at the visual appeals made to kids as well as at the content.

- Compare the fiction found in "school books" with the fiction found in various popular magazines.

- Compare the editorial stance of Newsweek, Nation, and U.S. News and World Report.

- Compare ads in Ms., True Romance, Woman's Day, etc. What do the ads say about the audiences?

- Analyze the image of Blacks (and other minorities) presented on TV, in movies, in magazines, in newspapers.

- Study the changes in the most popular types of shows over a ten year period (western, detective, medical, minority, situation comedies, variety).

- Analyze the images of adolescents on television (or in movies, or in popular fiction).

- Compare TV news programs.

- Make a collection of articles and news stories on an event of local or national importance gathered from various sources.

- Describe American humor; look at television, comics, movies, joke books, etc.

- Examine popular psychology as represented in books, magazines, radio and TV shows.

- Examine advice columns in magazines and newspapers. What seem to be people's major concerns and problems?

- Explore public access television. Find out how "regular people" can use television.

- Look into organizations and groups of people who are trying to have some influence on programming in the media. Gather information about the progress and problems of public input into television and other media.

- Choose an area or issue of interest (pollution) and evaluate and describe how it is presented in various media.

THE INTEGRATED CLASSROOM

Although it is important and helpful to have students look directly at media and become analytical about it, media study in isolation is not enough. Rather than merely offering media courses separate from the rest of the students' experiences, it seems more productive and vital to discuss and consider media along with students' literary and personal experiences. The effective integrated classroom contains media equipment (videotape, slide and film projectors, record players, tape recorders), magazines, newspapers, comic books, as well as all manner of traditional and popular fiction, poetry, and drama, and allows students various ways of exploring experiences, ranging from expository, analytical to creative, expressive ways of viewing and ordering reality.

Some topics which allow for a wide range of language and media modes (fiction/film/TV/music/poetry/drama) and methods of exploration (historical/sociological/cultural/aesthetic) are: Growing Up Female/Male; the American Indian; the American Dream; Games and Sports; Death; Identity; the Black Experience; the Adolescent Experience; the Hero/Heroine; and Isolation.

Given broad, thematic topics, students may use both traditional and popular forms as resources for their exploration of their world. In addition to drawing on media for information and experience, students should be able to use media to respond to the world around them and to express their ideas, feelings, and values.

A word of caution: When opening up the classroom to various options in forms of response, you run the risk of allowing your classroom to become fragmented with students "doing things" just because they're there, rather than because a particular form is appropriate or worthwhile to the kids' real response. The teacher will need to offer some guidance in helping kids move from experience to experience and in helping them make best use of what's available to them.

Teachers should not avoid using media because they are not experts. It is necessary, of course, to know how to operate the machinery or to have someone available who can (your AV person can help). And it is helpful, too, to have experimented with media. Teachers, like students, learn best by doing, and in order to feel comfortable about bringing media into the class the teacher probably needs some firsthand experience creating with media. But little information about what the teacher learns about composing with media (either in his reading or in his own trials) needs to be passed on to his students. After some basic pointers about how to make the equipment work, students should be able to do some experimentation and "playing" with the media to discover the effects they can achieve with what they are using.

Some media forms that can be integrated into your English class:

Filmmaking: Although filmmaking has become very popular as a separate course, it can be successfully integrated into traditional classes in literature and composition, as well as more broadly thematic or topical classes.

Because of the difficulty or coordinating soundtrack and picture, it is best for students to plan films which have a musical or narrative sound track. Senior high students seem to use film

best as a visual image concentrating on mood or theme in general. Often this means a poem or a piece of music provides the basis for the creation of the visual image. For junior high kids, this seems more difficult, and they do better at creating stories with film. Some ways of using film in the classroom:

- Capture the images of a poem; choose music appropriate to the poetry.
- Recreate the mood of a story, song, poem, drama.
- Use visual images to express an emotion, such as love, fear, anger, hatred.
- Explore the physical world with film, capturing subtleties, details; subjects might be cats, toes, old buildings, walks, fences.
- Explore an issue on film, such as conflict, pollution, conspicuous consumption.
- Retell a short story or fable on film.
- Create a sequel or parody of a film you've seen.

Videotape: The advantages of videotape over film are that the tapes are reusable, so that after the initial investment, videotaping is inexpensive; mistakes can be easily corrected merely by rewinding and retaping; it has sound so that dramatizations, talk shows, and interviews can be done. Though the picture is not as clear and precise as with film, videotape can be used to capture/create interesting visual images. Because it's reusable, students feel much freer to experiment and play around with videotape, and the results in the practice runs are often as enjoyable, creative, and exciting as the finished product. In addition, when given the chance to redo something, students may work and work polishing and manipulating an idea, often changing it in conception as well as quality.

Some suggestions for videotape:

- Create a TV series based on a novel or short story.
- Create parodies or satires of fiction or TV shows.
- Make a TV movie based on real experiences that you have had or that you have read about in magazines or newspapers.
- Do a talk show in which you interview characters from literature about how they feel about their lives and times; Or do a "Famous Authors" series in which various authors (from Shakespeare to Zindel) meet and talk about writing.
- Create advertisements to sell a movie, book, poem, or short story to the American public.
- Write, direct, and produce a play, and televise it; explore the possibility of doing it on public access television.
- Videotape a poetry reading or play production; explore the possibility of making the videotape available to other English classes.
- Research an issue; videotape a documentary which includes on-the-scene filming, interviews, and analysis.
- Videotape short improvisations and dramatizations based on novels, TV shows, short stories, poems, movies, songs.

Soundtape: Like videotape, soundtape can be used to produce both expository and artistic pieces. Its great advantage is that it is both inexpensive and easy to operate. In addition, students have an anonymity with soundtape that they don't have with videotape.

Some uses of soundtape:

- Produce radio plays, both student-written and published drama; or re-create short stories and novels for radio.

- Do fictionalized interviews with characters and authors, either about their "literary life" or about their views of contemporary issues and concerns.

- Make a tape of songs or music appropriate to a thematic unit being studied (images of women, isolation, identity) or to a piece of literature being studied.

- Tape sound effects for a classroom play production.

- Interview friends, neighbors, family as part of your research on issue or topic of interest to you.

Slide-tape: The slide show has exciting potential both as an artistic medium and a medium of social-political commentary. Using photo slides and hand made slides, a student can gather images from his personal world and the larger world. Students can do an effective show with relatively few slides (40-50), or they can do an elaborate show using a couple hundred slides, more than one screen, and a film shown simultaneously. The soundtrack can be made by taping television, radio, records, conversations, or readings of poetry, fiction, political speeches, letters, or magazine articles.

Some ideas for slide shows:

- Illustrate a current issue with slides and soundtape using newspaper articles, editorials, TV newscasters' reports, and politicians' speeches.
- Explore various approaches and perspectives on a broad theme, such as time, beauty, honor, death. Use poets', philosophers', historians' writings for your soundtape.

- Illustrate a song, poem, or story with visual images.

- Choose a particular group in American society (women, Blacks, farmers) and explore the images of that group projected by mass media.

- Use slides to create a personal narrative, an illustration of an experience or value that is important to you. The sound may be your own writing or writing that you think says something about you.

- Create an editorial with slides--on poverty, hunger, consumerism, nationalism.

Writing: While students are exploring their world and experience through new media and new composing processes, writing continues to be a direct, accessible, and immediate means of creating and communicating; in the integrated classroom students will continue to write, write, write

--reviews of movies, TV shows, records, books, plays (not book report style, but in the form of popular reviews).

--magazine articles, advertisements, short stories--for a particular magazine, or create your own.

--a poem in response to a movie, a TV show, or some music.

--a satire of a TV show or a movie.

--a letter to an editor or a guest editorial on a current issue.

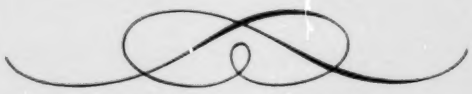
--advertising copy to sell a movie, book, poem, short story.

--letters to superstars or politicians.

--scripts for TV shows, movies.

--papers, including narratives, dialogs, expositions, on themes and issues which draw on both popular and traditional art . . . on artists, violence, changing values, animals, dreams.

(For further information and specific suggestions on media use, see, Herb Karl, "Multi-Media Resources," English Journal, January 1974, pp. 93-97; see also the October 1974 English Journal, an issue devoted to "120-Volt English Teaching.")



A NOTE ON THE MEDIA AND AESTHETICS

Critics of the media--especially those in the arts and humanities--have a habit of dismissing the content of the media as aesthetically inferior. Critics praise television and films that present classic or established works but tend to discount those that appeal to "mass audiences." The elitist often views the "mass audience" as a bunch of Charlie Tunas unable to distinguish "good taste" from what "tastes good." In the critic's eyes, the mass audience is only interested in what "tastes good." A major concern of the critic, then, becomes one of improving or raising tastes, of developing critical standards.

The fact is, however, that people have already developed their own critical standards. Whether the elitist likes it or not, people choose what television shows they want to watch, what records they want to listen to, and what movies they will cry over. They read the fiction that moves or interests them, and buy the magazines and newspapers that tell them what they want to know about. By denying the validity of these experiences, all that the elitist does is cut himself off from participating in a relationship that could lead to the mutual growth of individuals of differing tastes.

Young people, too, have aesthetic experiences with popular art, and they have standards that relate to those experiences. But they are not the standards of the elitist (necessarily). They are based on the individual reader, hearer, viewer in a particular developmental stage, with a particular set of experiences, some particular needs, in a particular time and place.

It is true that some people may live largely through fictional characters or prefer vicarious experiences that do not help them clarify reality and may actually distort it. Television or movies or fiction may become an escape from the real world. But television programs, movies, music, popular fiction all provide young people with important emotional, psychological and artistic (patterns of feeling, knowing) experiences. They provide relationships and identification with characters, they become sources through which kids deal with and expand their fantasy worlds, they provide intellectual stimulation, they provide new ways of knowing; in short, much of the content of mass media from soap operas to evening dramas, from rock music to jazz, from

Willy Wonka to Lenny, provides experiences which remove young people from the realm of their own existence and help them view their own and others' experience in a new way.

One of the important roles of the English teacher and the English classroom is to help students become aware of those experiences which are productive and important (in their own terms) and which are not helpful or useful (again, in their terms). It is through accepting and valuing kids' experiences that the teacher can enter into such a shared exploration--an exploration which helps the student grow intellectually, psychologically, emotionally.

RECOMMENDED READING

James Morrow and Murray Suid. MOVIE-MAKING ILLUSTRATED: THE COMIC FILM-BOOK. Hayden, 1973. (Introduction to basic filmmaking techniques, illustrated with materials from contemporary comics.)

Annelle Houk and Carlotta Bogart. MEDIA LITERACY: THINKING ABOUT. Pflaum/Standard, 1974. (Primer for teachers new to the media, with many practical teaching suggestions.)

Robert H. McKim. EXPERIENCES IN VISUAL LITERACY. Wadsworth, 1972. (A college-level text, with many ideas suitable for use in junior and senior high schools.)

Caleb Gattegno. TOWARDS A VISUAL CULTURE. Discus/Avon, 1971. (Excellent discussion of the role of TV in education.)

Edmund Carpenter. OH, WHAT A BLOW THE PHANTOM GAVE ME! Bantam, 1972/ (An anthropological study of the ways in which the media shape and are shaped by people in different cultures.)

David Coynick. FILM: REAL TO REEL. St. Mary's Press, 1972. (Text for a college-level film study course, but useful for secondary classes.)

THE INKWELL #4 was prepared by Susan Koch